

UNDERSTANDING THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN AND GIRLS

Supporting a Girl's Right to Learn

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Transcript

[TEXT: Young African Leaders Initiative Online Training Series]

Hello. My name is Cassandra Butts and this is *Supporting a Girl's Right to Learn*.

In this lesson, we will look at why it is important that women and girls have equal access to education. We'll review the adverse effects of not educating women and girls and the long-term consequences for countries that fail to do so. And we will discuss how to gain community support and implement a successful program to educate women and girls through an example I'll share.

I am a lawyer who has worked at international development and diplomacy. I have spent several years focused on advancing gender equality around the world. In my work, there has been no issue of greater importance to me than the pursuit of gender equality in education.

First, let me start by sharing the facts.

Why educate women and girls? Societies prosper when women and girls are educated. Educated women are healthier and earn higher incomes that can lift their households out of poverty. And the benefits are transferred to their children, who are better educated and have better health care. Communities and countries benefit from a more educated workforce, and increasing women's participation in the formal economy through education leads to greater economic growth.

Not only is educating women and girls essential to achieve higher levels of economic growth and development, it is also the right thing to do for humanity. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child both establish girls' education as a human right.

Over the past decades, substantial progress has been made toward achieving gender equality in education. Girls' enrollment in education has increased at all levels. For example, sub-Saharan Africa has experienced the greatest growth in girls' enrollment in primary education. Yet, there is still much work to be done.

It is estimated that worldwide, 62 million girls — half of whom are adolescent — are not in school. And the disparity in gender in education remains quite real today worldwide, with 78 percent of girls dropping out of school, compared to 48 percent of boys.

The United States has made substantial investments to prioritize girls' education around the world. I experienced those investments firsthand in my work at the Millennium Challenge Corporation, or MCC, an innovative United States international development agency that has done groundbreaking work throughout the world.

One example is a project done in Burkina Faso. Recognizing the substantial number of primary-school-age students who were out of school in West Africa in general, and Burkina Faso in particular, MCC partnered with the United States Agency for International Development to invest in a project called Burkinabé Response to Improve Girls' Chances to Succeed — BRIGHT. The goal of BRIGHT was to improve the quality of primary education, with an emphasis on increasing access for girls.

Working closely with the government of Burkina Faso, a nationwide analysis was performed to identify where girls' education rates were the lowest. The project built 132 primary schools, with classes from first grade through sixth grade in the identified provinces. The project also constructed 122 preschools in key communities to better prepare students for the leap to primary school.

A key aspect of the project was its focus on engaging the community to offer ideas to eliminate barriers to school attendance for area children. As a result, the project included a key social mobilization effort to support adult literacy and technical skills necessary to better equip parents to support their children's educational needs.

The project also embraced other social supports that were critical to encouraging student attendance and ensuring that students entered school capable of learning and retaining their lessons. Burkinabé girls too often drop out of school to get married, work around the homestead, or stay away because their schools lack private restrooms; boys often leave school to work in gold mines; and boys and girls miss school because of hunger or illness.

To alleviate these obstacles, MCC funded sacks of dry rice for home consumption during the school year. The project built 264 private latrines. And dug 10 boreholes and rehabilitated another seven to provide students access to safe drinking water.

What this partnership between international organizations, the national and local governments, parents and communities demonstrates is that there is a role for everyone to play in creating a safe, healthy and encouraging learning environment for girls. But it's not the size of this project that makes it significant. It is government and communities coming together to make education a priority and to identify and dismantle social barriers that keep girls and boys from attending school. And the results are an affirmation of their shared commitment.

The BRIGHT Project increased primary school enrollment, attendance and completion rates for girls in 10 of the country's 45 provinces. Over a 20-year period, the BRIGHT Schools Project is expected to benefit more than 272,000 students, parents and community leaders.

The BRIGHT Project is just one example of what can be done when gender equality in education is made a priority.

The point of this example is not that large sums of money are the solution to the problem. At the heart of the solution are individual stakeholders and local organizations working together within communities to identify and remove obstacles to educating girls.

A perfect example of this is happening in Malawi. There, organizations are mobilizing "mother groups" at primary schools to monitor girls' attendance and encourage girls who have left because of pregnancy or marriage to return to school. Many of these mother groups are also producing sanitary pads and selling them to girls at reasonable prices to eliminate a real obstacle to school attendance.

We know the facts and we know the way forward, and each of us must take it upon ourselves to commit to the imperative of furthering gender equality in education. There is an African proverb that says, "If you want to go fast ... go alone. If you want to go far ... go together." If we can come together to guarantee a quality education to women and girls, we all will go far.

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